

Attendees

Dale Olson, Clint Kolarich, Anton Brennick, Art Hall, Brandon Stephens, Dan Allhands, Darcie Warden, Eve Wills, Glenn Hockett, Jake Stewart, Jen Boyer, Jim King, Jim McNamara, John Meyer, Julie York, Kelly Weber, Kevin Suzuki, Lynn Rowberry, Reed Rowberry, Tom McLaughlin & partner, Ennis District Range Techs & Fire Crew

Agenda

Items

1. Introduction

The Greenhorn Working Group met at the Alder Volunteer Fire Station at 10:00. Clint Kolarich, NEPA Team Lead, made opening remarks and reviewed the agenda for the day. Everyone introduced themselves to the group because there were new people who had not been at previous working group meetings. The group departed for the project area.

2. Project Area Conifer Encroachment

The group stopped along Upper Ruby Road to view conifer encroachment from a comparison between current growth and historical photos of the area. Members of the group asked questions about how the Forest Service addresses fire suppression versus letting fires burn. Forest Service members described the decision-making process and multiple variables that go into the decision of whether to suppress or “let it burn,” including location, weather, and proximity to manmade structures such as homes. There was a related question on public outreach efforts to inform the public about Forest Service policies and practices dealing with fire. This is a good question; the answer is larger than this individual project and this Forest. There was a question about weed treatments to ensure that prescribed fires do not spread invasive weeds. Team members responded that controlling invasive plants is one of the factors they consider when developing treatment prescriptions.

3. Warm Springs Road Reroute

The group moved to the Warm Springs camping area and Clint reviewed the general conditions of Warm Springs Creek and the road. Present culverts can handle normal water flows, but are too small to allow for proper drainage during high water events. The road has repeatedly washed out, and the resulting erosion contributes to sediment issues in the creek. One potential solution is to reroute Warm Springs Road (NF-163) across the creek to the north-facing slope opposite the current road. This would include building two bridges. The road would re-connect with the existing road at the camping area above the springs. There was a question about the cost of building the proposed road. Clint responded that although there are no allocated funds for this work now, performing a NEPA analysis now means that if funds become available in the future, the work would already be NEPA cleared and ready to implement. The group discussed several alternatives to the proposed road including:

- Build a large bridge and culvert structure over the eroded section on the current road and install additional culverts on the creek. This alternative would not resolve issues with pulling trailers

around the sharp curve at the eroded spot, and could prevent trailers from utilizing the camping area in the future.

- Reroute the road across the hill above the current road.
- Close Warm Springs Road to motor vehicle traffic and build a connector from Timber Creek Road to the Warm Springs camping area.

4. Timber Creek Vegetation Treatments

The group moved to Timber Creek to view proposed vegetation treatment areas with existing conifer encroachment, and spent the rest of the day discussing vegetation treatment and timber removal options. There was a question about different burning options and mechanical removal of vegetation. The team responded that there are many factors in treatment selection, including types, amounts and ages of vegetation, steepness of slope, weather, and distance from roads.

One of the goals of the project is to treat a ridge above Timber Creek, which would create a corridor for wildlife, such as bighorn sheep. The Fire Management Officer pointed out that this does not mean there would be a bare ridge; treatments are designed to create a patchwork of vegetation. Multiple Forest Service personnel explained that the overarching goal of the project is to create a mosaic of timber and sagebrush parks in the landscape, not a vast tract of one or the other. The group discussed how natural fire creates these mosaics by burning out undergrowth and smaller plants, leaving larger, more established vegetation with more light and nutrients, and also allows younger plants to grow. Conifers are at 2-3 times their historic levels in this landscape because of a lack of fire; the treatments are meant to mimic this natural burning and restore the landscape to a more normal progression, with interspersed 2-5 acre parks of open ground that are now missing.

The Silviculturist pointed out that the forest is in a constant cycle of growth, death and regeneration and that fire plays a vital part in this cycle. In the absence of fire, insects and disease move through the undergrowth and dead and dying vegetation to replace some of the functions of fire. So, fire in the landscape can help control conditions that allow insect and disease infestations to become epidemic.

The group discussed Forest Service policies and procedures for selling timber that could be removed from part of the treatment area that contains saleable timber. There was a question about what the difference is, if any, between a timber sale and this vegetation project. The Timber Management Specialist explained that timber sales include large amounts of timber and the focus is on providing timber, wood products and economic benefit to the region. This project focuses on vegetation treatments—removing timber for sale is just one of several options being considered for removing excess conifers, and can only be used for a small portion of this landscape in conjunction with other treatments. Commercial removal of saleable timber also allows the Forest Service to fund improvements such as repairing roads, and repairing or improving failing or undersized culverts to reduce erosion and help reduce sediment delivery into waterways. These watershed improvements are designed by Forest Service aquatics specialists to improve the overall hydrological conditions of the immediate watershed. The funds can also support other improvement projects including increased noxious weed treatments and monitoring programs.

Next Meeting

July 20, 2017, 4 p.m. at the Madison District Ranger Office, Ennis

July 25, 2017, 8 – 10 a.m. at the Bozeman Public Library; Clint will be discussing the project with the Gallatin Wildlife Association.